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of the fur trade

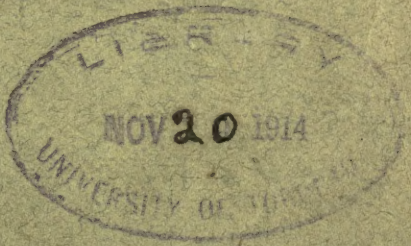
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A CHAPTER IN THE LITERATURE OF THE FUR TRADE

BY LAWRENCE J. BURPEE

The literature of the fur trade of North America offers a vast field to the bibliographer, as to the historian, philologist, ethnographer, and student of economics. We have the fur trade of New France; of New England; of Russian America; the sea-otter trade of the North West Coast; the western American fur trade; the trade of the Hudson's Bay Company; and of the North West and X Y companies. Of these seven divisions of a very large subject, I purpose merely to offer a few notes on the last two, from a more or less bibliographical point of view.

The Hudson's Bay Company, probably the most remarkable trading corporation in the world's history, was chartered by Charles II on May 2, 1670, as The Governor and Company of Adventurers of England trading into Hudson's Bay. With the prodigality of his age, King Charles endowed the Adventurers with "the whole trade of all those seas, streights, and bays, rivers, lakes, creeks, and sounds, in whatsoever latitude they shall be, that lie within the entrance of the streights commonly called Hudson's Streights, together with all the lands, countries, and territories upon the coasts and confines of the seas, streights, bays, lakes, rivers, creeks,

and sounds aforesaid, which are not now actually possessed by any of our subjects, or by the subjects of any other Christian prince or State." Possibly even King Charles might have stood aghast could he have known the extent of territory so granted to a private corporation, for the rivers flowing into Hudson Bay drain the whole interior of the continent west to the Rocky Mountains, and south to the headwaters of Red River in Minnesota. And as if this were not enough, the Adventurers, when after a century of deliberation they finally spread their operations inland from Hudson Bay, refused to confine themselves even to this broad watershed. By a process of reasoning common to all great monopolies, they climbed over the Rocky Mountains and annexed the Pacific slope, spread north to the Arctic, east to the Atlantic, and south to California. The literature of the Hudson's Bay Company is therefore that of a continental empire.

At the very threshold we are introduced to the narratives of one of the most picturesque adventurers of any age, Pierre Esprit Radisson, Canadian fur trader and explorer, who is rightly regarded as the father of the Hudson's Bay Company. Radisson's Journals, in the extraordinary idiom of a seventeenth-century French-Canadian expressing himself, with very imperfect knowledge, in the language of seventeenth-century England, were published by the Prince Society of Boston in 1885. They embody his travels and adventures from 1652 to 1684. They have been the center of a little whirlwind

of historical controversy, most if not all of which may be charged against his unmentionable English.

In 1668 Radisson, with ready adaptability, transferred his services from France to England, and two years later sailed for Hudson Bay, where, with his brother-in-law Medard Chouart, he laid the foundations of the huge monopoly of the Hudson's Bay Company. An interesting body of literature has grown up about the personality and achievements of Radisson, but that need not be further referred to here.

In a modest building, at the corner of Lime and Leadenhall streets, in the heart of London, are preserved the documentary records of nearly two and a half centuries of the history of the Hudson's Bay Company; a collection of fur-trade literature beside which all the available printed material pales into insignificance. It consists of minutes and letter-books of the company, memorials of every description, journals of operations at trading posts as wide apart as Labrador and Vancouver Island, narratives of explorations and trading ventures throughout the length and breadth of North America. Dr. Bryce, Beckles Willson, and Agnes Laut have gone to this mine of material for their histories of the company, but they have not touched more than the fringe of the subject. The building is packed with original documents from cellar to attic, literally tons of manuscripts piled from floor to ceiling, some of them bearing the accumulated dust of a couple of centuries. Through the interest of the present governor of the company,

Lord Strathcona, who is also High Commissioner for Canada in England, the Canadian archivist has had a copyist at work for some time past making transcripts of the more important journals, and a number of volumes of these are already in the Dominion Archives at Ottawa. It would take several lifetimes, however, to make much progress in this way, and Dr. Doughty is at present in England with a view to placing the work of copying upon a more extensive scale. The most satisfactory solution for students on this side of the Atlantic would undoubtedly be to transfer the entire collection to the Canadian Archives; but failing that, it is to be hoped that sooner or later these invaluable manuscripts may be deposited in the Public Record Office in England, where they would be properly housed and classified.

Of printed material bearing on the history of the company and its fur-trading operations, the Reports of the two Parliamentary Committees, of 1749 and 1857, are of particular interest. Both contain a large body of evidence, for and against the company, with data of every description bearing on the fur trade; and the former includes the valuable narratives of Henry Kellsey and Joseph La France. Many additional papers, copied in the Hudson's Bay archives, and not elsewhere available, are included in the volume of *Documents Relating to the Boundaries of Ontario*, published by the Ontario government in 1878; as well as in the Reports of David Mills and Charles Lindsey on the same subject, published in 1873. Other documents bearing on the western fur

trade have been included from time to time in the *Reports of the Canadian Archives*; and the archivist has this year begun the publication of a *Bulletin*, which will be largely devoted to Journals of the fur trade. The Journals of Alexander Hunter Murray and François Antoine Larocque have already been published in this form, and the Journal of John McDonnell is now in the printer's hands. Important material on the fur trade is also available in the published transactions of the Royal Society of Canada, and of the Historical and Scientific Society of Manitoba, as well as in the *Annual Reports of the Canadian Geological Survey*.

In the long and romantic search for a Northwest Passage, it will be remembered that the Hudson's Bay Company was closely involved, one of the terms of the original charter requiring them to search diligently therefor. Being keen business men, intent on gathering dividends from the fur trade, they were far from anxious to waste their energies on an enterprise which, even if successful, would work them more harm than good. A group of determined enthusiasts in England, however, forced them into action, and several expeditions were sent out under the company's auspices to search for a passage by way of Hudson Bay. The narratives of these expeditions form a connecting link between the fur trade proper and the purely scientific expeditions into the arctic seas. That they were negative in their results, as far as the Northwest Passage was concerned, goes without saying, but so far from satis-

fying the enthusiasts, the effect was to direct a stream of invective against the unfortunate company, which was charged by such peppery gentlemen as Arthur Dobbs and Alexander Dalrymple with deliberately suppressing the evidence as to a passage. Dobbs's *Account of the Countries Adjoining Hudson's Bay* is one of the most ingenious and elaborate products of a fixed idea. Dobbs *knew* that the passage must be there, and he devoted a large and most readable volume to prove his theory; incidentally cursing the Hudson's Bay Company from every conceivable point of view. Captain Middleton published a spirited *Defence of the Company*; Dobbs came back with his *Remarks upon Middleton's Defence*; Middleton retorted with his *Answer*; and Dobbs, determined to have the last word, issued his *Reply*. The chief value of this controversial literature today is the purely incidental light it throws on the methods and results of the early fur trade.

Throughout the eighteenth century, and even earlier, the company sent several expeditions inland to explore the country, and induce the tribes of the interior to bring their furs down to the company's posts on the bay. The first of these was that of Henry Kellsey, in 1691, the narrative of which is included in the Hudson's Bay Report of 1749. In 1754-55, Anthony Hendry made a journey from York Factory to the country of the Blackfeet, in the foothills of the Rocky Mountains; and in 1772-73, Matthew Cocking covered almost the same ground. Hendry's *Journal* is published in the

Transactions of the Royal Society for 1908; and Cocking's in 1909. All three are of value to the student of the fur trade. Even more so, from this and other points of view, is the narrative of Samuel Hearne's remarkable journey from Prince of Wales Fort to the mouth of the Coppermine, 1769-72. Hearne's *Journey* is a classic, comparable to Mackenzie's *Voyages* as the record of a splendid piece of exploration, but of infinitely more value to the ethnologist. His spirited style is also in marked contrast to the dry narrative of Mackenzie.

An interesting story in connection with the publication of Hearne's narrative is told in the introduction to the *Voyage of La Perouse*. Hearne was governor of Prince of Wales Fort in 1782, when it was captured by La Perouse. The French admiral carried his prisoner off to France, but treated him on board rather as a literary friend than as a prisoner of war. Among the spoils of the fort was Hearne's manuscript, and this La Perouse, after reading it with deep interest, returned to the explorer upon the express stipulation that it must be published immediately on his arrival in England. The book actually appeared in 1795, three years after Hearne's death, as a large quarto volume. An octavo edition was published in Dublin, in 1796. A reprint, with introduction and notes by J. B. Tyrrell, the explorer of the Barren Lands, will be issued in 1911 by the Champlain Society.

Two years after his return from the Coppermine, Hearne was sent inland to build a trading post on the Saskatchewan. The incentive to this move on the part

of the Hudson's Bay Company—the first radical departure from their century-long policy of masterly inactivity—was the spirited opposition of a group of fur traders from Montreal, who, not content with the opportunities afforded at Michilimackinac and Grand Portage, had pushed on in the footsteps of La Vérendrye to Lake Winnipeg, the Assiniboine, and the Saskatchewan. From the Saskatchewan they turned north to the Churchill, by way of Frog Portage, and succeeded in intercepting the western Indians on their way down to the bay. That the despised “pedlars,” as they called them, should dare to invade their own special territory filled the Hudson's Bay Company with wrath, but the thing was an accomplished fact, and nothing remained but to abandon their comfortable monopoly on the shores of the bay and fight the interlopers on the inland waterways. From this time dates the rivalry of the English and Canadian fur traders, a rivalry steadily increasing in bitterness, until it finally culminated in the Seven Oaks affair, in which Governor Semple lost his life, and which led to the union of the companies in 1821.

These Montreal fur traders, who had fallen heir to the inheritance of the fur trade of New France, had united their individual interests in the North West Company, in 1784. This corporation did not, however, represent the total Canadian strength. Two powerful merchants, John Gregory and A. N. McLeod, with a couple of western traders, Peter Pond and Peter Pangman, organized a rival company, which also gained the support

of Alexander Mackenzie and his cousin Roderick. This was but the beginning of a medley of rival interests in the fur trade, into the intricacies of which it would be unprofitable at present to enter. It is sufficient to mention that the most powerful of these smaller organizations was that known as the X Y Company, organized in Montreal in 1795, and that all the Canadian interests were eventually united in the North West Company.

From our present point of view, the most interesting figures in this group of Canadian fur traders are Alexander Mackenzie and his cousin Roderick McKenzie. The former shed luster upon his company and nation by the double exploit of descending the mighty river that bears his name, to the Arctic, and making the first overland journey to the shores of the Pacific. Roderick devoted his latter years to gathering material for an elaborate history of the western fur trade. This was never published, or even completed, but the material gathered by McKenzie is preserved in the Archives of McGill University, and a number of the more important journals, written by such veteran fur traders as Simon Fraser, F. A. Larocque, Charles McKenzie, Duncan Cameron, and John McDonald of Garth, have been published in L. R. Masson's *Bourgeois de la Compagnie du Nord-ouest*—an invaluable repository of material bearing on every phase of the western fur trade.

Alexander Mackenzie's *Voyages from Montreal through the Continent of North America* was published in London in 1801; and a French translation appeared in 1802, in

three volumes. The story of this French version is worth telling. It appears that Napoleon I, searching for ways and means of reaching some vital portion of his irrepressible enemy across the channel, hit upon the ingenious idea of making a flank movement upon Canada, Nelson blocking the way to a front attack. Napoleon had heard of the discovery of the mouth of the Mackenzie, and that that great river flowed out of a lake in the heart of the continent, and he conceived the plan of sending a fleet to the Arctic by way of Bering Sea, ascending the Mackenzie, and capturing Canada from the rear. In order to make himself familiar with the geography of the country to be traversed, he sent a trusty messenger to London, smuggled over a copy of Mackenzie's *Voyages*, and had it translated at lightning speed. Other more vital matters unfortunately interfered with the brilliant project, but his countrymen were at least benefited by an excellent version of the *Voyages*. The incident, if true, throws an interesting light upon the character of the emperor. He was undoubtedly a great general, but he was no geographer.

Although no one has yet written the history of the North West Company, it certainly is not from lack of material, which is abundant both in print and in manuscript. The latter is found chiefly in the Dominion Archives and in the McGill University Library. The former covers the whole period of the British fur trade from Montreal. The earliest narrative is that of Alexander Henry the *Elder*, whose *Travels and Adventures*

in Canada and the Indian Territories was first published in New York, in 1809. It was reprinted, with introduction and notes, by the late Dr. James Bain, in 1901. An interesting Memorandum of Henry's on a proposed overland route to the Pacific is published as an appendix to *The Search for the Western Sea*. The original is in the library of M. Phileas Gagnon, the well-known collector of Canadiana at Quebec.

Some years ago that indefatigable student of western history, the late Dr. Elliott Coues, discovered in the Library of Parliament at Ottawa the voluminous journal of another Alexander Henry, nephew of the former, and also a prominent figure in the fur trade. This journal he edited and published in three volumes, in 1897, using to illustrate the text copious extracts from the journals of another famous fur trader, David Thompson. Thompson was much more than a fur trader. He was for many years the astronomer of the North West Company; had previously seen service with the Hudson's Bay Company; and is remembered as the discoverer of the upper waters of the Columbia. He kept an elaborate series of journals, from 1784 to 1850—covering the amazing period of 66 years. The originals are preserved in the Crown Lands Department at Toronto, and fill about forty volumes.

Daniel Williams Harmon, a contemporary of Henry and Thompson, also followed the praiseworthy practice of keeping a journal. Unfortunately, it was placed in the hands of a well-meaning clergyman of Burlington,

Vermont, who in editing it for publication not only transformed the original into his own stilted language, but introduced pious reflections on the fur trade, the Indians, and every other conceivable subject, until the personality of the worthy old fur trader is completely enveloped in a mist of New England Puritanism. One has only to compare this bowdlerized journal with the unvarnished tale of Alexander Henry to realize the gulf that must lie between it and the lost original. Oh, that one might get the Reverend Daniel Haskel in a corner, and give him a piece of one's mind, unbowlerized! But unfortunately he departed this life about the middle of the last century. Harmon's Journal was published at Burlington in 1820; and reprinted in New York, 1903.

One might ramble on indefinitely among these records of the western fur trade, but there is a limit even to the patience of bibliographers, and that limit is I feel already overpassed. Lest you feel that there has been too much comment, and not enough bibliography, in this very rambling paper, let me offer you in conclusion the titles of a couple of pamphlets preserved among Mr. Locke's treasures in the Toronto Public Library. The first reads: "A Short Narrative and Justification of the Proceedings of the Committee appointed by the Adventurers, to prosecute the Discovery of the Passage to the Western Ocean of America; And to Open and Extend the Trade, and Settle the Countries beyond Hudson's Bay. With an Apology for their postponing at present

their intended Application to Parliament. To which are annexed the Report and Petitions referred to in the Narrative; And the Papers prepared to be Delivered to the Lords and Commons, upon presenting the Petition, as the Foundation for a Parliamentary Enquiry, and the Facts they were prepared to support; Now laid before the Publick, for their future consideration." The other is: "A Short State of the Countries and Trade of North America. Claimed by the Hudson's Bay Company, under pretence of a Charter for Ever, of Lands without Bounds or Limits, and an exclusive Trade to those unbounded Seas and Countries; Shewing the illegality of the said Grant, and the abuse they have made of it; and the great benefit Britain may obtain by settling those Countries, and extending the Trade amongst the Natives by civilizing and incorporating with them, and laying a Foundation for their becoming Christians and industrious Subjects of Great-Britain; and the necessity there is of a Parliamentary Enquiry into the pretended Rights and exclusive Monopoly claimed by the said Company, and their abuse of the Grant. That those Countries may be settled, either by fixing a Company under proper Regulations and Restrictions, or by laying open the Trade to all the British Merchants, and settling them, at the Publick expence, or by a moderate Tax upon that Trade." These two modest little items were published at London in 1749. May their shadows never grow less!

A brief working bibliography is appended to this paper.

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MANUSCRIPT SOURCES

The principal depository of original documents bearing on the Hudson's Bay Company, and its trading operations in North America for nearly two and a half centuries, is the Archives of Hudson's Bay House, London. Manuscript journals and letters are also preserved at the principal posts of the Company, such as Norway House, York Factory, Fort Chipewyan, and Fort Simpson. Many important documents are also included in the H. H. Bancroft collection, in the University of California.

Original material bearing on the history of the North West Company and the X Y Company is preserved in the Canadian Archives, at Ottawa; in the Library of Parliament, Ottawa; in the Archives of McGill University, Montreal; in the Crown Lands Department, Toronto; in the Legislative Library, Winnipeg; the Library of the Manitoba Historical and Scientific Society; and the Legislative Library, Victoria. Most of these sources also cover material on the Hudson's Bay Company.

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